



**Department of Justice
U.S. Attorney's Office
Southern District of Texas**

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**LAST DEFENDANT IN SOUTH TEXAS HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND
SEX SLAVERY PROSECUTION CONVICTED**

McALLEN, TX – The last of eight Mexican nationals charged for their roles in a sex slavery conspiracy pleaded guilty in McAllen, Texas, Assistant Attorney General Wan J. Kim of the Civil Rights Division and U.S. Attorney Don DeGabrielle of the Southern District of Texas announced today. Hector Soto, a 23-year-old Mexican national and one of several brothers charged in an August 2003 indictment for their roles in a family-based alien smuggling operation smuggled and held captive Mexican and Central American women, who were then forced to cook, clean and submit to the sexual demands of the smugglers, was convicted today of harboring aliens in a safe house apartment located in the Houston area.

After evading arrest for almost three years, Hector Soto was arrested on April 24, 2006 by Border Patrol agents in Brownsville, Texas. At today's re-arraignment hearing, Hector Soto was convicted for harboring aliens in a safe house apartment in the Houston area. The safe house was a destination for undocumented aliens smuggled into the country and transported to Houston from the Rio Grande Valley. Soto admitted that the aliens were housed in the apartment prior to traveling to their final destinations. Hector Soto faces a maximum penalty of ten years in prison and a \$250,000 fine at his sentencing scheduled to occur on Oct. 12, 2006, and is subject to deportation following his release from prison.

"The Soto Brothers case shows the importance of cooperation between law enforcement agencies in bringing traffickers to justice and helping rescue and restore their victims," stated Assistant Attorney General Wan J. Kim for the Civil Rights Division. "Stopping the traffickers who prey on some of the most vulnerable members of society is a priority for the Justice Department. We are committed to prosecuting those involved in the systematic abuse and degradation of others."

"Today's conviction should send a strong message: Our efforts to see justice served will continue until all those charged for engaging in human trafficking are in custody, no matter how long that may take," said U.S. Attorney Don DeGabrielle.

Hector Soto's brothers, Juan Carlos Soto, 31, and Armando Soto-Huato, 24, and another co-defendant, Martin Cortez-Gutierrez, 29, all pleaded guilty in August 2003 to charges of involuntary servitude and human trafficking offenses. In a joint disposition with the Hidalgo County District Attorney's Office, Juan Carlos Soto and Martin Cortez-Gutierrez also pled guilty

to State rape charges for their actions against the women. Four other members of the conspiracy each pled guilty during the summer of 2003 to alien smuggling and related charges.

At his re-arraignment hearing, Juan Carlos Soto admitted to running a human smuggling operation, holding women from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador against their will, raping several of the women and forcing them to do work without pay. His brother, Armando Soto-Huato, helped lead the smuggling organization and acknowledged not only his role in holding women against their will until their smuggling fees were repaid by their families or through compelled service to the organization, but also to knowing of the ongoing rapes. Co-defendant Martin Cortez-Gutierrez admitted to participating in the Soto brothers' smuggling operation and to holding a young Salvadoran woman in a condition of compelled service and to raping her.

In January 2004, U.S. District Court Judge Randy Crane sentenced Juan Carlos Soto to 23 years in federal prison, without parole; Armando Soto-Huato was sentenced to ten years in prison; and Martin Cortez-Gutierrez to 14 years. Other low-level members of the conspiracy received prison sentences ranging from four to 27 months in prison.

The victims have been relocated to safe quarters and are receiving immigration and refugee assistance provided for by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA). Since the passage of the TVPA in October 2000, more than 1000 victims of trafficking have been provided federal assistance.

The indictment in this case was the result of an interagency investigation including the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), Office of Border Patrol and the Hidalgo County Sheriff's Office.

This case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Ruben R. Perez of the U.S. Attorney's Office of the Southern District of Texas and Special Litigation Counsel Lou de Baca of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division.

Anyone having knowledge of others subjected to similarly-described conduct is urged to contact the Houston office of the FBI at the above number or the Human Trafficking Rescue Alliance through the Houston office of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement at 281-774-4900.

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